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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: THIRD SESSION OF 52ND LEGISLATURE OPENS
IN USAID RENOVATED CAPITOL BUILDING

11. (U) SUMMARY. The Senate and House of Representatives of Liberia opened the third session of the 52nd Legislature January 14 with two separate ceremonies. Though the ceremonies were largely procedural and did not outline much regarding the 2008 legislative agenda, every speaker expressed thanks to the United States for the beautifully renovated Capitol building. Lawmakers in the House briefly sparred over whether an outside body should be allowed to investigate bribery allegations of \$5,000 payments to impeach former speaker Edward Snowe. END SUMMARY.

FIRST OPENING CEREMONIES IN RENOVATED CAPITOL

12. (U) The Senate and the House of Representatives held separate ceremonies January 14 to mark the opening of the third session of the 52nd Legislature in each of their respective chambers. The ceremonies consisted of opening prayers, a roll call of present members, a motion and vote to open the session, speeches by the Chambers' leaders, a moment of silence for all members who died the previous year, and a closing prayer. The House of Representatives also hosted legislative delegations from two other ECOWAS countries as special guests. Speaker of the Parliament Roch Marc Christian Kabore represented Burkina Faso and Deputy Speaker of the Assembly Abdoulie Bojang represented Ghana. After both ceremonies, President Sirleaf presided over a lunch in the Capitol's newly renovated banquet hall.

DESPITE MINIMAL FURNITURE AND ELECTRICITY, CAPITOL BUILDING
IN USE

13. (U) Every member of the legislature expressed thanks for the U.S.-funded renovation of the Capitol. Though the building still lacks electricity and furniture, both chambers decided that they would cease holding meetings in the Unity Conference Center in Virginia. A small generator provides enough power for overhead lights in the conference rooms, but there is no air conditioning or power for the hallways. Picnic chairs and tables have been set up on the lawn of the Capitol so that members can congregate outside in order to escape the indoor heat and have more light. Some members have brought their own furniture from home for their offices until GOL furniture can be provided. Others continue to use the U.S.-funded library and computer lab, set up the capital by the National Democratic Institute, for an office. The Legislative branch is working with the Executive branch to secure funding for furniture and electricity soon.

BRIBERY INVESTIGATION ISSUE FOR HOUSE MEMBERS

14. (U) The only item of contention was the issue of outside investigation of bribery allegations in the House. Representative Dr. Kettehkumuehn C. Murray, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the House, said emphatically in his

speech that the legislature is a sacred, august, and independent body and "no outsiders should be allowed to come in and investigate." Representatives Edward Forh and Elijah Seah disagreed and called for an extended probe if necessary. The allegations refer to claims that some members received \$5,000 for signing a resolution to impeach former Speaker of the House Edward Snowe.

COMMENT

15. (U) While the opening ceremonies of the House and Senate brought no significant surprises, the use of the Capitol was informative. We were told as recently as last week that legislative sessions would continue to be held at the Unity Conference Center in Virginia until the electricity and furniture problems were solved but all meetings are now taking place in the Capitol. The luncheon for about 250 people was also successful despite the lack of air conditioning. In any case, the Liberian legislature is clearly proud of its new Capitol and very grateful to the U.S. Government for financing the effort.

16. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: The good news on the bribery allegation issue is that the legislators (and some elements of civil society) are now seriously debating how, rather than whether, to investigate the allegations. It is no longer just the ICGL and the U.S. calling for action. END COMMENT.
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